

Baird Proposes Forest Fire Remedy (May 19, 2003)

Washington, D.C. - U.S. Rep. Brian Baird offered the following today regarding House consideration of H.R. 1904 - the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003:

With summer approaching we urgently need to reduce the risks of catastrophic fires caused by unnatural forest conditions and insect infestations. This is especially important in our drier forests on the east side of the Cascades, but there are also dangerous conditions in some of our west side forest lands. It makes no sense to spend millions of dollars, risk countless lives and lose thousands of acres of valuable resources fighting fires after they start when we know what needs to be done and could act now to prevent or minimize the dangers ahead of time.

Congress should act quickly to provide a means for expediting selective thinning and the removal of insect infested trees. Further, when fires do occur, quick access should be granted to harvest the burned trees that still contain usable wood. Too often, these legitimate measures to prevent or respond to fires have been blocked or delayed by lawsuits or overly lengthy environmental reviews.

Unfortunately, as so often happens in Congress these days, the legislation that will be debated this week is the wrong solution to the problem. Two critical flaws undermine what would otherwise be sound reforms.

First, under the guise of *environmental assessments*, the proposed law would give the Secretaries of the Interior or Agriculture the sole discretion to authorize clear-cuts of up to a thousand acres of forests at a time, totaling up to 250,000 acres. Yet there would be no evaluation whatsoever of the environmental impacts or alternatives and in fact there is no requirement that the harvest have any relationship to actually improving forest health or reducing fire hazards. This blanket authority goes too far and invites abuses. There are much better ways of expediting interventions without abandoning all environmental concerns and without granting excessive authority to individual officials.

An amendment to the *healthy forests* bill would require the Secretaries to seek a review of proposed *assessments* harvests. The catch is the reviews the amendment proposes would be conducted by a panel appointed by the Secretaries themselves. That is hardly an objective or valid process.

What is needed instead are truly independent review by experts in the field who can evaluate the proposed areas and determine the actual risks and benefits of the proposed remedies. I offered an amendment that would provide for such reviews under the aegis of the National Academy of Science. Under my proposal, such reviews would have to take place within sixty days of the proposal of a harvest action. If the independent experts agree that the areas identified are indeed at substantial risk and the proposed actions would reduce those risks or provide needed scientific information, then the actions should be allowed without further review or appeal. Because harvests genuinely intended for forest health or fire reductions can usually be planned well in advance, this review process would provide reasonable and truly independent expert oversight without allowing for delays through litigation or appeal.

The second major flaw in the current bill concerns a program that is overtly billed as protecting uniquely sensitive areas on private lands. The law authorizes up to seventy-five million dollars to pay private landowners for *conservation easements*. The trouble is the easements are not permanent, because they can be bought back later once the trees mature and are ready for harvest. In other words, under the proposed legislation, the taxpayers would pay millions to private landowners to do what they would already do with no long term benefit to the public. We do need to help private landowners participate in efforts to protect habitat and the environment, but this is not the way to do it and it is not sound or necessary policy.

Regrettably, the House Rules Committee, as it so often does, refused to even allow members to introduce amendments to the final bill so their merit could be debated.

I am convinced there is a real need to reduce the risks of fires and take proactive measures to improve forest health. To

achieve those goals, I am fully willing to support reasonable measures, including increased selective harvests and limits on appeals and litigation. But we can and should establish a way to meet the legitimate goals without granting excessive authority to single individuals or token review panels, and without spending millions of taxpayer dollars for private gains with no real or lasting benefits to the public.

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